

# Stressed kids get help coping

Illinois is 1st state to require schools to teach about feelings

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As rain trickled down outside, a classroom full of 2nd graders noisily shuffled their chairs into a circle on a recent afternoon.

The wet weather had kept them inside Von Humboldt School all day, so they fidgeted restlessly in their chairs as their unusual lesson began.

"It's good for you to feel if you've made someone angry or upset," said Alicia Heltmach, a teacher at the school at 2620 W. Hirsch St. in Humboldt Park.

The children went around the "talking circle," sharing frustrations from their school day--and potential solutions. An energetic boy with bright eyes, Keshawn Kumsa, 8, was upset that a classmate curses at him when he gets to school. A petite Agrismary Santiago, 7, was unhappy that her classmates constantly distract her when she's trying to pay attention in class.

Heltmach's weekly sessions are an example of how teachers at Von Humboldt are embracing the concept of social and emotional learning, an innovative idea to help students learn to understand and control their feelings.

Illinois became the first state in the nation to require schools to incorporate the concept into the regular school day by passing the Children's Mental Health Act three years ago. State officials have developed age-appropriate guidelines for students. For example, elementary pupils need to be able to explain why unprovoked acts that hurt others are wrong. But individual schools are left to craft their own programs.

"The act acknowledged that children's social and emotional development is essential," said Barbara Shaw, chair of the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership. "We are treating [social and emotional learning] like math and reading and history."

In 2007, schools will be able to apply for grants through the Illinois State Board of Education to train teachers and parents in how to implement social and emotional learning standards. Shaw said \$3 million from state funds will go toward the effort.

Chicago Public Schools has worked to increase support staff, including nurses, social workers and psychologists, and focused on schools with significant discipline problems, according to Ken Papineau with the district's Office of Specialized Services.

Meanwhile, Von Humboldt is working with Caryn Curry from the Mental Health Association of Illinois to develop its own approach.

Nearly half of the students in the prekindergarten through 8th-grade school are traumatized as a result of the experiences they face in the tough neighborhood, teachers said. Gang violence is ever-present in the neighborhood, according to parents and teachers. And 90 percent of students were classified as low-income in 2005, according to the district.

The stress they face in daily life makes it difficult for students to sit down and concentrate in the classroom and get along with their peers. The stress can manifest itself in health problems, with students complaining of lack of sleep or constant headaches, according to health experts.

A 2003 Illinois Children's Mental Health Task Force report found that 10 percent of children suffer from a mental illness that can impair daily functioning at home and at school.

To counter the high stress level, staff members and teachers at Von Humboldt are making a concerted effort to create a friendly and welcoming environment throughout the school.

"Saying a quick hello to a 2nd grader, for example," Curry suggested at a workshop in mid-November, "might be the first positive acknowledgment the 2nd grader has heard all day."

Out are threats or measures that can intimidate the child, which prove to be more negative in the long run.

"You instill fear in this kid, trigger the trauma," Curry said. "They may fear you, but when they go to the school librarian or gym teacher, they will still have all of those same discipline issues."

Discipline problems have already started to decrease in the school, the result of follow-up with parents and engaging the pupils in school, said Von Humboldt Principal Christ Kalamatas.

The number of out-of-school suspensions in the first 10 weeks of school were in the high 60s last year, said Kalamatas.

This fall, there have only been about eight.

Small changes within the classroom have also made a difference. Heltmach's meetings, for example, bring a little consistency to her pupils' lives.

"The class meetings started out really well," said Heltmach, a teacher at the school for 14 years.

But, she added, "I have a couple of challenging kids. It's hard. From one week to another, it can be totally different. At least you know you're going to touch some of them."